

# Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: The Origins of Regime Fragility in Egypt and Syria and the Arab Spring's Implications for the Future Operating Environment

A Monograph

by

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## **Abstract**

Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: The Origins of Regime Fragility in Egypt and Syria and the Arab Spring's Implications for the Future Operating Environment, by MAJ George C. Greanias, USA, 53 pages.

The Arab Spring revolutions in Egypt and Syria were significant disruptions to the Middle East and North Africa region. Their continually evolving consequences present the United States with immense challenges to regional and international stability. Responses to the Arab Spring demand a nuanced appreciation of the sources of fragility and causes of revolution that toppled the Mubarak regime and continue to embattle the Assad regime. Crucially, the individual histories of Egypt and Syria indicate that repressive authoritarian regimes were unresponsive to and disconnected from the broad mass of their populations and failed to meet the basic expectations of their citizenry. Several stressors amplified the regimes' fragility, namely: increasing radical Islamism, the capacity for social mobilization through Internet and communication technologies, long-term demographic pressures, and—crucially—climate-driven pressures. The fact that the US military is likely to deepen its response to the Arab Spring and similar instability indicates that studying the origins of these crises is indispensable.

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## Introduction

Every age has its follies; perhaps the folly of our age could be defined as an unmatched ambition to change the world, without even bothering to study it in detail and understand it first.

—Antonio Giustozzi, *Decoding the Taliban*

On 17 December 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi, a poor, disgruntled Tunisian fruit vendor, set himself on fire to protest depressing economic prospects and an abusive authoritarian regime.<sup>1</sup> By mid-January 2011, Bouazizi's example inspired a Cairene restaurateur to burn himself on the steps of the Egyptian Parliament.<sup>2</sup> A series of copy-cat self-immolations followed and soon enormous crowds of Egyptian youth rallied in Cairo's Tahrir square; their chants for "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice!" echoed loudly in the streets and through cyberspace.<sup>3</sup> In the ensuing weeks and months, North Africa and the broader Middle East witnessed a surge in demonstrations and uprisings galvanized by a dizzying constellation of grievances. The wider world puzzled over how to interpret the protest cascade known as the Arab Spring; no official reaction from the White House came for a month.<sup>4</sup> The revelation that strategic surprise could occur on such a scale was deeply unsettling to those charged with American foreign policy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karim Fahim, "Slap to One Man's Pride Set Off Tumult in Tunisia," *New York Times*, January 21, 2011, accessed on December 15, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/22/world/africa/22sidi.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/22/world/africa/22sidi.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>2</sup> "Egyptian injured after self-immolation protest," *Reuters*, January 17, 2011, accessed on October 23, 2014, <http://af.reuters.com/article/egyptNews/idAFLDE70G0EB20110117>.

<sup>3</sup> Ahdaf Soueif, "An Eyewitness Account of the Egypt Protests," *The Guardian*, January 28, 2011, accessed on March 10, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/28/eyewitness-account-egypt-protests>.

<sup>4</sup> Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 14, 2011, accessed on November 12, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa%20>.

<sup>5</sup> "'Obama 'Disappointed' By Intel on Arab Unrest," *CBS News*, February 4, 2011, accessed on January 24, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-disappointed-by-intel-on-arab-unrest/>.

The Arab Spring, however, was more than just another strategic surprise. The Arab Spring is arguably emblematic of the US military's future operating environment in which unpredictability and the potential for rapid sociopolitical change will be constant. The speed and scope of these disruptions are products of the ever-advancing communication technologies that democratize information and accelerate cascading social movements.<sup>6</sup> As unpredictable as those cascades will be, they will not appear *de novo*. Regardless of how "disruptive technologies" enable social action, these disruptions will still spring from the sociopolitical contexts within a given society.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the US Army should devote serious study to the Arab Spring revolutions as phenomena long in the making. The Arab Spring demonstrates that no matter how sudden or dynamic a situation appears, its emergent qualities are tethered tightly to the sociopolitical and ecological contexts and history that undergird them.

This monograph is neither an explication of the causes of the Arab Spring nor an attempt to blame the US foreign policy community for "failing" to predict it. Instead, it is an argument for drawing realistic lessons from the Arab Spring that consider the pre-existing sources of volatility and the catalytic pressures that pushed the countries over the brink. The two most visible, and arguably most important, byproducts of the Arab Spring have been the Egyptian revolution and the ongoing Syrian civil war. These two cases share substantial similarities and differences in terms of their origins, progression, and outcomes. As such, this monograph traces the processes by which each state grew increasingly fragile to provide a richer understanding of the origins of the current environment. It argues that the key features of both Egypt and Syria left them without the sufficient resiliency to absorb the "shock" of the Arab Spring. Chiefly, these sources of fragility lie in the nature of the state governing apparatus, long-term demographic pressures,

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<sup>6</sup> Habibul Haque Khondker, "Role of the New Media in the Arab Spring," *Globalizations* 8, no. 5 (October, 2011): 675 – 6.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph L. Bower and Clayton M. Christensen, "Disruptive Technologies: Catching the Wave," *Harvard Business Review* (January – February, 1995): 43 – 4.



and the state's role in the economic life of the nation. Two disruptive stimuli amplified the extant fragility to push both countries to the breaking point: information and communication technologies and climate-driven pressures. Both will increase in prominence globally in the coming decades and will be important features of conflict and social change.

### **Egypt's Recipe for Revolution: [No] Bread, [No] Freedom, [No] Social Justice**

Hosni Mubarak presided over Egyptian political life for over three decades from 1981 to 2011. Within that time, his regime bore witness to and commanded a great many of the sociopolitical developments that led to the Tahrir square uprisings in 2011. However, it would be disingenuous to imply that that all of Egypt's modern history preordained the singular moment when Mubarak stepped down. In the preceding decades, tensions and pressures rose throughout Egyptian society that were at once separate and contingent phenomena. It is essential therefore to appreciate the nature of those tensions and their interrelationships.

A useful method to explore the root causes is to use the most iconic slogan from Tahrir Square as a roadmap. "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice!" was one of the earliest and most popular chants among the protestors and captures the initial character of the revolution.<sup>8</sup> "Bread" refers to the high cost of living and the regime's interventionist economic policies that left many Egyptians dependent on a faltering food subsidy system. "Freedom" refers to the Mubarak regime's authoritarian and dictatorial history that stifled political dissent and fueled collective resentment. "Social Justice" refers to the abject failure of the Egyptian system to provide for an equal or fair distribution of goods and individual liberties. Endemic corruption, rampant unemployment, and underemployment impoverished millions as the government-allied elite lived comfortably.<sup>9</sup> Many

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<sup>8</sup> David Ignatius, "In Egypt, Real Politics is About to Begin," *Washington Post*, February 16, 2011, accessed on November 11, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/16/AR2011021606442.html>.

<sup>9</sup> "Egypt: A Revolution Against Neoliberalism?" *Al Jazeera*, February 24, 2011, accessed on March 7, 2015 <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/02/201122414315249621.html>.

of these tensions stalk the new regime of President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi as the inheritor of Mubarak's legacy.

This section will alter the order of the slogan and explore the Revolution's roots via a slightly altered sequence: Freedom, Social Justice, Bread. This modification allows for an exploration of the revolution's causes that establishes the structural weaknesses (Freedom and Social Justice) and then describes how dramatic spikes in the cost of living (Bread) pushed Egypt over the brink. In addition to the structural fragility of the Egyptian state, demographic and technological trends were essential to Egypt's revolution.

#### Freedom Delayed: The Three Decade Emergency

In October 1981, militants from the terrorist group, Islamic Jihad, assassinated Anwar Sadat, Egypt's president and secular Arab icon.<sup>10</sup> This pivotal event signaled a new high watermark for Islamist movements throughout the region.<sup>11</sup> In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Muslim Brethern and their allies carried out a wave of assassinations and terror attacks in Syria aimed at toppling the Assad regime. In 1979, the secular government in Tehran had just been overthrown by a popular Islamist revolution. In Afghanistan, anti-Soviet/anti-Communist mujahedeen provided a heroic and potent symbol of the real power of Islam—one that promised success where other political ideologies faltered. Islamism was on the march and Sadat's death demonstrated the immediate threat it posed to Sadat's secular Egypt.

Egypt's long and deep relationship with Islamism is well known. In the late 1920s, Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo. Its military wing carried out attacks against the monarchy throughout the 1940s. Gamel Abdel Nasser, the founder of modern Egypt

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<sup>10</sup> Paul L. Montgomery, "West, Hearing of Sadat's Death, Mourns the Loss of a Friend," *New York Times*, October 7, 1981, accessed on February 14, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/07/world/west-hearing-of-sadat-s-death-mourns-the-loss-of-a-friend.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, "Egypt After Sadat," *New York Times*, October 7, 2010, accessed on March 10, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/07/world/egypt-after-sadat.html>.

and architect of pan-Arabism, initially shared many interests with the Muslim Brotherhood. Both Nasser's nationalism and the Brethren's Islamism were staunchly anti-monarchist and anti-colonial. Both sides viewed the monarchy as a lapdog for British Imperialism and cooperated when Nasser successfully ousted the king in a 1952 coup.<sup>12</sup> In 1954, the relationship soured when Nasser suspected the Brotherhood in an assassination attempt and punished them through a systematic campaign of repression and persecution that lingers to the present day.

During this clampdown, a leading Islamist intellectual, Sayeed Qutb, wrote *Milestones* while incarcerated in an Egyptian prison. His works became Al Qaeda's philosophical wellspring.<sup>13</sup> The Egyptian government imprisoned Qutb and hundreds of other of Muslim Brothers throughout the 1960s and 70s. The crackdown pushed the Islamists into the shadows; they became more militant, clandestine, and anti-governmental. During this era, the Brothers—and their many hardliner offshoots—framed all of Egyptian society as their adversary. *Takfirist* ideology provided an avenue to expand their fight against the Egyptian establishment throughout the 1960s and 70s by sanctioning the killing of “apostate” Muslims who did not conform to their fundamentalist values.<sup>14</sup> The Islamists' goals were incompatible with the Egyptian government as most Islamist groups demanded exclusive Quranic law and supremacy of Islamic jurisprudence over secular governance. To illustrate the nature of Islamist grievance with the Egyptian government, Egyptian Islamic Jihad offered twenty reasons for why they assassinated Sadat in 1981. Of those, seventeen dealt with the secular nature of his government.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>14</sup> Dale C. Eikmeir, “Qutbism: An Ideology of Islamic-Fascism,” *Parameters* 37, no. 1 (Spring, 2007): 89.

<sup>15</sup> Nahman Tal, *Radical Islam in Egypt and Jordan* (Portland: Sussex Academy Press, 2005): 92 – 93.

Upon assuming the presidency after Nasser's sudden death in 1970, Sadat pursued ambitious domestic and foreign policy programs that aggravated the internal Islamist security threat. Sadat faced the immediate challenges of a stagnant economy and a nation still reeling from the loss of the Sinai peninsula in the 1967 Six Day war. Negotiations over the recovery of the Sinai were going nowhere and Israel had militarily occupied Egypt's historic territory.<sup>16</sup> Sadat devised the offensive 1973 October War to force the West and Israel to redress the 1967 war's settlement and recover the Sinai peninsula. The October War led to warming relationships between Cairo and Washington as well as a sort of peace with Israel. At home, Sadat pushed limited market liberalization schemes on Egypt's sclerotic economy. The limited deregulation and normalized relations with Israel and the United States after the war drew the ire of the Muslim Brotherhood and other conservative elements of Egyptian society. Sadat quickly went from the "hero of the crossing" from the 1973 war to a prime target of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>17</sup>

Sadat's regime was to some degree responsible for nurturing radical Islam. In cooperation with Washington, he aided and armed the Afghan mujahedeen and sanctioned the travel of thousands of young Egyptian men to Pakistan and Afghanistan where they joined the anti-Communist jihad. Thousands of Egyptians fought in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> Egypt was one of the highest proportional contributors of worldwide mujahedeen, which indicated how potent Egyptian Islamism had become.<sup>19</sup> These policies were continued and enhanced under his successor, but Sadat's initial commitment to the mujahedeen was crucial to Egypt's, and his own,

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<sup>16</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948 – 1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002) 98 – 9.

<sup>17</sup> Tal, *Radical Islam in Egypt and Jordan*, 38.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 137 – 41.

<sup>19</sup> "Arab Veterans Of Afghanistan War Lead New Islamic Holy War," *Compass News*, October 28, 1994, accessed on March 19, 2014, [https://fas.org/irp/news/1994/afghan\\_war\\_vetrans.html](https://fas.org/irp/news/1994/afghan_war_vetrans.html).

future. Hazem Fahmy, a former official in Mubarak's foreign ministry, placed immense significance on the role of Islamization in sowing the seeds of the Arab Spring revolution:

This development, more than any other, radically transformed...Egypt, the Arab and Muslim world, and later, [the world]. The Arab and Muslim youth who fought in Afghanistan...returned to their home countries emboldened by their defeat of one of the world's two superpowers, and looked inward toward regime change.<sup>20</sup>

Upon Sadat's 1981 killing, his successor, Hosni Mubarak, reacted to the perceived Islamist threat with a significant expansion of the security services. Mubarak's government immediately embarked on a three-decade crackdown that targeted the Muslim Brotherhood, but stifled all forms of political dissent. The primary feature of the Egyptian security state was the "emergency law" enacted in October 1981, which permitted indefinite detention and trial without due process by military courts, prohibited gatherings of more than five people, and placed stringent limits speech and association.<sup>21</sup> The law remained intact until the end of the Mubarak regime and gained infamy among regime critics—and the Tahrir square protestors—who saw it less as a security measure and more as a method to clamp down on dissent and deter reform.<sup>22</sup>

The confrontation between the Brotherhood and the regime escalated throughout Mubarak's rule. Mubarak himself escaped multiple assassination attempts and used the security services largely unfettered by constitutional restrictions to repress, prosecute, and neutralize the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>23</sup> Eventually, the security services attained authority to shoot extremists on

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<sup>20</sup> Hazem Fahmy, "An Initial Perspective on 'The Winter of Discontent': The Root Causes of the Egyptian Revolution," *Social Research* 79, no. 2 (Summer, 2012): 354 – 5.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Williams, "Egypt Extends 25-Year-Old Emergency Law," *Washington Post*, May 1, 2006, accessed on March 10, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/30/AR2006043001039.html>.

<sup>22</sup> "Cairo Bans Firearms and Verifies Reports of New Crackdown," *New York Times*, October 18, 1981, accessed on February 16, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/18/world/cairo-bans-firearms-and-verifies-reports-of-new-crackdown.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Fahmy, "An Initial Perspective on 'The Winter of Discontent', 359; "Profile: Hosni Mubarak," *BBC News*, November 29, 2014, accessed on February 16, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12301713>.

sight without explanation. As the security services became more violent, Egyptian society suffered an increasingly heavy burden. In addition to the persecution of Islamists, the security services opened the aperture of their repression and by targeting any perceived threat to the regime. According to Fahmy, “the hefty price of this security was the Egyptian’s own individual liberty.”<sup>24</sup>

The effects of the emergency law and the resultant empowerment of the security services fueled collective resentment toward the government in 2010 and 2011. The law empowered extrajudicial imprisonment and re-imprisonment of any individual deemed a security threat without any hint of due process. Further, any business, political, or administrative appointee required a security clearance from the security services. In this way, the security law cloaked rampant government corruption and nepotism under a veil of security, leading many Egyptians to view the supposed security threats as a stalking horse for the enrichment of the regime’s cronies. The corruption flamed the passions in Tahrir Square as highlighted by the invective hurled by the crowds at Mubarak’s Interior Minister. His personal wealth was estimated at nearly \$3 billion (USD) in a country when the average Egyptian was unable to meet minimum food needs on an average \$2 (USD) a day income.<sup>25</sup>

#### Social [In]justice: Corruption, Poverty, and Dynasty

Egypt has long struggled to cultivate a stable middle class dedicated to the success of the state. When Nasser rose amidst a nationalist wave that dissolved Egypt’s monarchy, he made the most significant contribution to the creation of a middle class through economic reforms built on

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<sup>24</sup> Fahmy, "An Initial Perspective on 'The Winter of Discontent', 359.

<sup>25</sup> Joe Beinin, “Egyptian Workers Demand a Living Wage,” *Foreign Policy*, May 12, 2010, accessed on March 19, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/12/egyptian-workers-demand-a-living-wage/>; Popular flyer from Tahrir Square, “Because We Want to Realize These Demands, We Are Protesting in Tahrir,” Tahrir Documents, <http://www.tahrirdocuments.org/2011/08/because-we-want-to-realize-these-demands-we-are-protesting-in-tahrir/>; Index Mundi., accessed on March 22, 2015, <http://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?c=eg&v=67>.

socialist principles of equality and wealth redistribution. His ambitious program required a massive increase in the size of the bureaucracy to the point that government employment soon became the pathway to social mobility and stability for most Egyptians.<sup>26</sup> Though Nasser's efforts led to Egypt's greatest broad-based prosperity in the modern age, it lacked the political and bureaucratic foundations to survive without Nasser himself at the helm.<sup>27</sup> After Nasser's rule, his successors were unwilling to continue the radical redistribution from the rich to the incipient middle class and, simultaneously, unable to disassemble the massive public sector. Consequently, the Egyptian economy remained largely mired in malaise and stagnation for the past four decades.

Sadat attempted to break with Nasser's socialist programs. After gaining significant domestic and international prestige during the 1973 October War, Sadat turned Egypt from the Soviet Bloc toward the United States and embarked a campaign of economic "openness" or *Intifah* designed to grow the economy and control public sector. Unfortunately, the *Intifah* campaign did more to further enrich Egypt's elite while the broad base of poor and middle-class Egyptians, which had benefited from Nasser's socialism, were increasingly marginalized.<sup>28</sup> In short, the economy grew, but did not expand. As incomes flattened throughout the 1970s and 80s, inflation further eroded middle and lower class Egyptian's purchasing power.<sup>29</sup> In many cases, openness allowed the well-connected to secure lucrative government contracts or business licenses as the working poor simply saw their Nasserist safety net weakened. Consequently, Muslim Brotherhood recruitment focused on the dual-motivations of economic frustration alongside the Islamic duty to reject Sadat's pivot toward the West and his collusion with their

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<sup>26</sup> Tarek Osman, *Egypt on the Brink: From the Rise of Nasser to the Fall of Mubarak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 54.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 132 – 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 134 – 135.

Israeli nemesis.<sup>30</sup> As Sadat attempted to push further market reforms alongside a decrease government food subsidy programs, he encountered stiff popular resistance.<sup>31</sup> In sum, Sadat's reforms led to enrichment for the elite while the majority of Egyptians became less well-off, less nationalistic, and less connected to their secular government.

During his tenure, Mubarak attempted to address some of the structural weaknesses of the Egyptian economy by investing in modern infrastructure. To finance these investments, he borrowed aggressively from international donors. Though many Egyptians judge his infrastructure projects as a bright spot in his legacy, they were massively expensive. The enormous foreign debt limited his ability to subsidize or manage many other badly needed social programs.<sup>32</sup> In 1991, Mubarak gained a temporary respite from this debt albatross by acting as a leading Arab voice for the United States' expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait. In exchange for its support, Washington helped relieve Egypt of 50 percent of its international debt burden and opened pathways for foreign direct investment and free trade, contingent on Egypt accepting the economic liberalization concepts central to the "Washington Consensus."<sup>33</sup>

Unfortunately, for the vast majority of Egyptians, the result was no different than Sadat's *Intifah*. The bulk of the economic benefit from the new trade enriched wealthy elites and did little to bolster the sluggish economy.<sup>34</sup> The newly-created business tycoons bought themselves influence within the government and security services to include cabinet appointments. As a result, the Egyptian government became deeper enmeshed with private business interests whose

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>31</sup> "Thousands in Egypt Riot Over Price Rise," *New York Times*, January 19, 1977, accessed on January 24, 2015, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1977/01/19/75022657.html?pageNumber=7>.

<sup>32</sup> Fahmy, "An Initial Perspective on 'The Winter of Discontent', 361.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 360.

<sup>34</sup> Osman, *Egypt on the Brink*, 153 – 154.



wealth was neither reflective of, nor a product of, Egyptian society. Again, the Egyptian bureaucracy remained essentially unchanged. The economy remained stagnant while the country's population and lower classes ballooned.<sup>35</sup>

Mubarak's own son, Gamal, profited handsomely from the reforms of the 1990s and 2000s. By the mid-2000s, Egyptians viewed Gamal as the *de facto* successor for his father. A Western-oriented technocrat, Gamal maintained tight relationships and leadership positions among Egypt's business and political elites. His public positioning foretold the succession plans with some amplification from the state-run media that leadership would "pass from one generation to the next."<sup>36</sup> As Egyptians grew disillusioned with the regime and dynastic succession, many voted for "independent" candidates—nearly all Muslim Brethren—who won an astonishing share of the parliamentary seats in 2005 despite government vote rigging. The fact that the Muslim Brotherhood performed so well at the ballot box in 2005 highlighted the level of disenchantment with the regime. As Fahmy puts it:

The overlapping strands of police brutality, economic corruption and profiteering, and the political stagnation of the regime culminating in the succession debate created a highly explosive mix awaiting the metaphoric match of an indignant society whose majority had been intentionally marginalized and ignored for decades.<sup>37</sup>

#### Bread: Government Grains

Egypt's overreliance on imported wheat and unaffordable food subsidies intensified the regime's vulnerability to broad social movement. The Egyptian population grew rapidly at approximately 2.8% increase per year from 1960 to 2010.<sup>38</sup> Owing largely to improved medical care and decreased infant mortality, the rate of growth was emblematic of the entire Middle East

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Fahmy, "An Initial Perspective on 'The Winter of Discontent', 370.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>38</sup> The World Bank, Egyptian population growth data 1960-2010, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/tableview.aspx>.

and North Africa region. However, the growing population's food demands exceeded Egypt's domestic production capacity. By the mid-1970s and 80s, Egypt was heavily reliant on food imports to feed its people.<sup>39</sup>

Beginning in the 1960s, the Egyptian diet became increasingly unbalanced driving the government to intervene in the food economy. An over-reliance on maize sparked widespread nutritional concerns as the government observed a brutal vitamin deficiency epidemic.<sup>40</sup> Eager to show the benefits of "Arab Socialism," President Nasser initiated a government subsidy system in the mid-1960s for all manner of consumer goods with foodstuffs at the top of the list.<sup>41</sup> By 1981, a staggering 14 percent of Egyptian government expenditures were on the food subsidy alone.<sup>42</sup> Corruption at all levels—from the government ministries to the local bread vendors—compounded the expense of these programs.<sup>43</sup> Cost and waste aside, government-subsidized wheat flour (*baladi*) became the staple of many Egyptians, particularly the poor.<sup>44</sup>

While global wheat prices were stable, the subsidy system proved a manageable, albeit burdensome, government expense. However, periodic wheat price spikes highlighted the fragility in the subsidy system and resulted in domestic instability.<sup>45</sup> One prominent example occurred in

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<sup>39</sup> Osman M. Galal, "The Nutrition Transition in Egypt: Obesity, Undernutrition and the Food Consumption Index," *Public Health Nutrition* 5 (2002): 142.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> "Thousands in Egypt Riot Over Price Rise," *New York Times*, January 19, 1977, accessed on January 24, 2015, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1977/01/19/75022657.html?pageNumber=7>.

<sup>42</sup> Akhter U. Ahmed, et al., *The Egyptian Food Subsidy System Structure, Performance, and Options for Reform* (Washington DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2001): 1.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Slackman, "Egypt's Problem and Its Challenge: Bread Corrupts," *New York Times*, January 17, 2008, accessed on January 23, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/17/world/africa/17bread.html?\\_r=](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/17/world/africa/17bread.html?_r=).

<sup>44</sup> Galal, "The Nutrition Transition in Egypt, 143.

1973 when global transportation costs spiked, ironically driven by the Saudi Arabian oil embargo meant to support Egypt in the October War. The spike drove up Egypt's food import prices by 37 percent and left the government strained to afford the food subsidies along with the costly expenses of war with Israel.<sup>46</sup> Sadat experienced internal and external pressure to decrease the exorbitant subsidy system. Internally, his ministry of finance could not afford the spike; externally, his debt negotiations and rapprochement with the West—the United States and International Monetary Fund in particular—pressured him to withdraw from public food provisioning.<sup>47</sup>

Any decrease in the subsidies, however, disproportionately affected Egypt's poor, many of which who were already scrapping by and completely dependent on cheap *baladi*. In January 1975, the sting of war-induced inflation motivated thousands of protesters to denounce the government in Tahrir square.<sup>48</sup> The ironic relationship between the 1973 October War and the state of Egyptian finances was not lost on the protesters in Tahrir square in 1975 as they chanted, "Hero of the crossing, where is our breakfast?"<sup>49</sup> Two years later, the government again attempted to reduce subsidies and sparked the famous "Bread Riots" of 1977 that killed nearly

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<sup>45</sup> "Cairo Eases Prices, But Rioting Goes On,," *New York Times*, January 20, 1977, accessed on January 24, 2015, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1977/01/20/75025159.html?pageNumber=11>

<sup>46</sup> Ahmed, et al., *The Egyptian Food Subsidy System*, 6 – 7.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Henry Tanner, "1,000 Riot in Cairo to Protest Inflation," *New York Times*, January 2, 1975, accessed on January 24, 2015, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1975/01/02/issue.html>; Henry Tanner, "Sadat Hoped to Provide Guns and Butter, But So Far, Just Guns," *New York Times*, January 5, 1975, accessed on January 24, 2015, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1975/01/05/427299401.html?pageNumber=162>.

<sup>49</sup> Helen Chapin Metz, ed. *Egypt: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990) accessed on February 23, 2015, <http://countrystudies.us/egypt/43.htm>.

100 people with 800 more injured.<sup>50</sup> No matter the cause of the increased cost of living, the Egyptian government consistently found its fate tied to the availability of *baladi* and the subsidy system that allowed the sizable Egyptian poor and urban population to survive.

Thirty years later, the 2008 global food crisis spiked the cost of living three-fold for Egyptians.<sup>51</sup> Widespread riots stoked fears of outright rebellion and threatened the Mubarak regime.<sup>52</sup> The 2008 food crisis had many causes but most experts pointed to a shortage of wheat and other grains resulting from increased production of corn for ethanol and bio-fuels in the United States. This coupled with drought-induced wheat failures in Australia, the global financial crisis, and high cost of oil left the international food distribution system especially vulnerable.<sup>53</sup> The Egyptian government responded to the crisis by increasing the salaries and pensions of government employees, increasing the government disbursements of basic foodstuffs, increasing the availability of government-provisioned foodstuffs, and offsetting some of the costs by decreasing subsidies for cigarettes and other non-food items.<sup>54</sup> None of these responses did anything to alter interrelated issues of poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and deep dependency on government involvement of the food markets.

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<sup>50</sup> “Egypt Raises Some Prices But Holds the Line on Food,” *New York Times*, December 29, 1978, accessed on January 24, 2015, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1978/12/30/110991060.html?pageNumber=3>.

<sup>51</sup> Rosamond L. Naylor and Walter P. Falcon, “Food Security in an Era of Economic Volatility,” *Population and Development Review* 36, no. 4 (December, 2010): 694.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Slackman, “In Egypt, Technology Helps Spread Discontent of Workers,” *New York Times*, April 7, 2008, accessed on January 23, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/07/world/middleeast/07egypt.html?adxnnl=1&fta=y&adxnnlx=1422043227-NRTJZwFkegIztv6+cGp5KA>.

<sup>53</sup> Derek Headey and Shenggen Fan, “Anatomy of a crisis: the causes and consequences of surging food prices,” *Agricultural Economics* 39 (2008): 378.

<sup>54</sup> Egyptian Ministry of Finance, Egypt Response to Global Crisis, Macro Fiscal Policy Unit, June 2009, accessed on January 24, 2015, <http://www.mof.gov.eg/MOFGallerySource/English/Egypt%20Response%20to%20the%20Global%20Crisis.pdf>.

Egypt's experience with bread riots in the 1970s and in 2008 demonstrate how vulnerable the food supply was to exogenous shocks. Such shocks became more likely as the Egyptian government owed more in the form of subsidies to a consistently growing population. The price of wheat remained high after the 2008 global food crisis and had only declined modestly by the fall of 2009.<sup>55</sup> One year later, another unforeseen shock in the global price of food would have catastrophic consequences for the Mubarak regime and Egyptian stability.

#### Over the Brink

In 2009, an intense drought deeply affected China's winter wheat harvest, jeopardizing the country's food supply.<sup>56</sup> China's immense population and authoritarian government have made it vulnerable to food shortages in the past and Beijing acted quickly to ensure reliable access to food in the face of the drought.<sup>57</sup> China promptly responded to shore up its projected domestic shortages through large-scale purchases of the global wheat supply thereby reducing the international inventory and driving up prices.<sup>58</sup> The Chinese purchase notwithstanding, however, wheat prices—while high—appeared relatively stable heading into 2010.<sup>59</sup>

Shortly after China completed its precautionary purchases, a second serious shock struck global food supplies. Russia and Ukraine's wheat producing regions suffered record heat and

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<sup>55</sup> Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, *2010 FAO Statistical Yearbook* (New York: United Nations, 2010), [http://www.fao.org/docrep/015/am081m/am081m00.htm#Contents\\_en](http://www.fao.org/docrep/015/am081m/am081m00.htm#Contents_en).

<sup>56</sup> Michael Wines, "Worst Drought in Half Century Shrivels the Wheat Belt of China," *New York Times*, February 24, 2009, accessed on January 25, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/25/world/asia/25drought.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Mark A. Cane and Dong Eun Lee, "What Do We Know About the Climate of the Next Decade," in *Food Security and Sociopolitical Stability*, ed. Christopher B. Barrett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): 65.

<sup>58</sup> Troy Sternberg, "Chinese drought, bread and the Arab Spring," *Applied Geography* 34 (2012): 520.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

drought throughout the summer of 2010.<sup>60</sup> Moscow, though initially confident that its grain reserves were sufficient, eventually enacted export bans: on wheat.<sup>61</sup> The Russian export bans and the Chinese surplus purchases resulted in a cumulative spike in global food prices by December. In Egypt, where the cost of living was already extremely high for the nation's substantial poor population, a further increase in wheat prices pushed the protest-prone population to their limit.<sup>62</sup>

In January 2011, the crowds in Tahrir may well have been inspired by Bouazizi's act of suicidal defiance in Tunisia, but for most, their proximate concerns were truly "kitchen table" issues. Many protestors framed their anti-regime messages on food insecurity and cost of living issues. This tactic was deliberate in order to create the broadest possible appeal between democracy advocates and the more conservative Egyptians who simply could no longer afford their meager lifestyles.<sup>63</sup>

Though an unanswered surge in global food prices stressed the government's food subsidy program, it did not result in any actual starvation or famine. Food insecurity, therefore, is only a partial explanation of why Egyptians were ready and willing for revolution. Two other long-term trends in Egypt were essential: unmet individual expectations and the proliferation of information and communication technologies. Both these trends had long ago indicated their capacity to drive instability. Egyptian youth had long-struggled with their hopes for an Arab, or at

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<sup>60</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, "Russians and Their Crops Wilt Under Heat Wave," *New York Times*, July 19, 2010, accessed on January 25, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/20/world/europe/20russia.html?fta=y>; "U.N. Agency Calls Meeting on Spike in Food Prices," September 3, 2010, accessed on January 25, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/04/business/global/04food.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, "Drought in Russia Ripples Beyond Wheat Fields," August 27, 2010, accessed on January 25, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/28/business/global/28wheat.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Sternberg, "Chinese drought, bread and the Arab Spring," 523.

<sup>63</sup> Flyer circulated in Tahrir Square during the 2011 Arab Spring, "Solution to the bread crisis," translated by Omar Foda, <http://www.tahrirdocuments.org/2011/08/the-solution-to-the-bread-problem/>.

least Egyptian, renewal but various crises also compelled the government to resist sweeping reforms. Social media penetrated much of Egyptian society and became a platform for dissent and political commentary for several years before the revolution.<sup>64</sup> Combined with food insecurity and cost of living increases, these two trends cascaded into a social revolution.

Demographics may not be destiny, but they certainly describe a great deal about any society. Since the Second World War, Egypt's demographic trends were in keeping with norms across the region and, if anything, its growth was more stable than that of its neighbors.<sup>65</sup> The concept of a "youth bulge" in which a country's youth population multiplies faster than its economy grows to absorb the new workers is an apt descriptor of the Middle East and North Africa region during the second half of the twentieth century in general and Egypt in particular.<sup>66</sup>

The dismal economic prospects for Egypt's youth grew in stark contrast with their rising expectations. Successive Egyptian governments placed a premium on post-secondary education and this was most true with the Mubarak regime.<sup>67</sup> Broader education opportunities brought higher expectations of social mobility and personal fulfillment.<sup>68</sup> By the mid-2000s, university students were Egypt's fastest growing group of new entrants in the workforce.<sup>69</sup> The most sought-

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<sup>64</sup> Muzammil M. Hussain and Philip N. Howard, "What Best Explains Successful Protest Cascades? ICTs and the Fuzzy Causes of the Arab Spring," *International Studies Review*, 15, no. 1 (2013): 49.

<sup>65</sup> "World Databank: World Development Indicators," Worldbank, accessed on March 27, 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/>.

<sup>66</sup> Osman, *Egypt On the Brink*, 208.

<sup>67</sup> Filipe R. Campante and Davin Chor, "Why Was the Arab World Poised for Revolution? Schooling, Economic Opportunities, and the Arab Spring." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 26, no. 2 (Spring, 2012): 179.

<sup>68</sup> Randall Kuhn, "On the Role of Human Development in the Arab Spring," *Population and Development Review* 38, no. 4 (December, 2012): 674.

<sup>69</sup> Regui Asad and Farzaney Roudi-Fahimi, *Youth In the Middle East and North Africa: Demographic Opportunity or Challenge?* (Washington DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2008): 6.

after positions were secure jobs in the government bureaucracy and competition for these positions was intense, and often based more of personal connections than merit.<sup>70</sup> The result was the unhappy combination of rising education and poor job prospects.<sup>71</sup> Instead of anchoring the middle class, Egypt's well-educated saw their hope turn to pessimism and they became disaffected and resentful of their government.

The role of social media and the Arab Spring is well understood. Information and communications technology enabled Egypt's large population of overeducated and underemployed urban youth to communicate and amplify their grievances. Domestic social media and activism were alive and well in Egypt long before Bouzazi's 2010 suicidal protest and the subsequent Jasmine Revolution went viral in Egypt. For instance, the "April 6 movement" began as a supportive Facebook page for striking workers in an industrial town in the Nile river delta in 2008.<sup>72</sup> The workers protested lost wages from increased cost of living as the government struggled to deal with the food crisis. The April 6th movement soon coalesced into a forum to express all manner of frustrations: from enmity for "Zionists," to disdain for their own government, its repressive laws, and their frustrating living conditions. In 2009, after bread prices stabilized, the 6 April movement's Facebook page had over 70,000 "friends" and was a regular source of anti-government discourse.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Chris Hedges, "Domestic Pressures Hurt Rising Stature of Egypt," *New York Times*, July 12, 1992, accessed on January 27, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/12/world/domestic-problems-hurt-rising-stature-of-egypt.html>; Chris Hedges, "A Train Along the Nile Reflects Real Egypt," July 28, 1995, accessed on January 27, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/28/world/a-train-along-the-nile-reflects-a-real-egypt.html?pagewanted=2>.

<sup>71</sup> Campante and Chor, "Why Was the Arab World Poised for Revolution?" 174.

<sup>72</sup> Khalid Ali, "Precursors of the Egyptian Revolution," *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin* 43, no. 1 (January, 2012): 20 – 1.

<sup>73</sup> Samantha M. Shapiro, "Revolution, Facebook Style," *New York Times*, January 22, 2009, accessed on January 26, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25bloggers-t.html>.



In June 2010, seven months before the revolution, Egyptian police beat to death Khalid Said, a twenty-eight year old Alexandrian man, at a cybercafé in Cairo over his online posting of a widely shared video that showed evidence of police corruption.<sup>74</sup> Said became a symbol for the Egyptian revolution after Wael Ghonim, a Google marketing executive, catapulted the “We Are All Khalid Said” into a rally point for the Tahrir square protesters.<sup>75</sup> Both the April 6th and the “We are All Khalid Said” movements disseminated the revolutionary zeitgeist throughout Egyptian society, especially the youth.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, the countries that felt the most rapid effects of the Arab Spring—Tunisia and Egypt—were the most highly connected to the Internet.<sup>77</sup> Ironically making his regime more vulnerable to protest cascade and revolution, Mubarak himself pushed communications and Internet modernization in a bid to bolster economic development. This development permitted millions of young people to access the Internet and social media, creating a space for dialogue on democracy, human rights abuses, and political change that eventually contributed to the downfall of the regime.<sup>78</sup>

Social media and the Internet were not the only important communications technology that socialized the ideals and motivations of the revolution. Older non-interactive technologies, such as satellite television, were vital as well. While social media could animate the youth, satellite television connected the entire Egyptian population to the events in Tunisia and

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<sup>74</sup> Brian Ross and Matthew Cole, “Egypt: The Face That Launched a Revolution,” February 4, 2011, accessed on January 27, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/egypt-face-launched-revolution/story?id=12841488&page=1>.

<sup>75</sup> Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater Than the People in Power* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 58 – 60.

<sup>76</sup> Merlyna Lim, “Framing Bouazizi: ‘White Lies’, hybrid network, and collective/connective action in the 2010—11 Tunisian Uprising,” *Journalism* 14, no. 7 (2013): 937 – 8.

<sup>77</sup> Hussain and Howard, “What Best Explains Successful Protest Cascades?” 50.

<sup>78</sup> Fahmy, “An Initial Perspective on ‘The Winter of Discontent,’” 372.

broadcast the hope felt by many that their own dictatorial regime might be vulnerable.<sup>79</sup> A key commonality between social media and satellite television is that they are difficult for the government to censor. Social media benefits from what Ethan Zuckerman calls the “cute cat” theory in which dissidents use the same platforms for online protest that peaceful citizens use to share benign content such as “cute cat” videos.<sup>80</sup> If the government attempted to restrict access to “cute cat” sharing platforms, the resultant repression would likely alienate key and potentially volatile constituencies.

The calls for revolution would have likely been ignored even ten years ago. The transformation of the Egyptian media landscape and the penetration of social media made political change more possible and more rapid. Indeed, Internet access provided Tunisia and Egypt’s youthful protestors an avenue to learn and share techniques of social mobilization and non-violent protests such as mitigating the effects of tear gas, protecting against rubber bullets, and building broad-based coalitions.<sup>81</sup> The Egyptian April 6th movement sought advice and support from Serbian democracy activists “Otpor!” (Resistance!) as early as 2009 as a means to craft their message and develop protest tactics.<sup>82</sup> When the Arab Spring provided the opportunity to employ their learned techniques, the April 6th movement was ready. A clear lesson of the Arab Spring is that social media amplify the activist’s capacity for political change. As anticipated by Arquilla and Ronfeldt, in 2002, “the Internet’s capabilities provid[e] a powerful tool to organize

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<sup>79</sup> George Joffé, “The Arab Spring in North Africa: Origins and Prospects,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 16, no. 4 (December, 2011): 525.

<sup>80</sup> Ethan Zuckerman, “Cute Cats to the Rescue? Participatory Media and Political Expression,” *Youth, New Media and Political Participation*, Forthcoming, accessed on January 26, 2014, <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/78899>.

<sup>81</sup> Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0*, 85 – 6.

<sup>82</sup> Nahed Eltantawy and Julie B. Wiest, “Social Media in the Egyptian Revolution: Reconsidering Resource Mobilization Theory,” *International Journal of Communication* 5, no. 18 (2011): 1213 – 4.

far-flung activists; to rapidly share news or replicate successful strategies from one location to another; or to focus activists on a single, well-defined goal.”<sup>83</sup>

Through a careful analysis of unmet socioeconomic and political expectations, long-term demographic trends, and the penetration of information and communication technology, the Egyptian revolution appears to be an obvious consequence of Egyptian societal fragility. However, these pressures had existed for decades prior to the Spring. It was not until the final push of twin shocks of spiking global food prices—in both 2008 and 2010 food crises—and the momentum of the Tunisian Jasmine revolution that the Mubarak regime began to unravel. Certainly, none of these factors alone was responsible for the 2011 revolution in Egypt. Instead, each factor amplified the others.

### **Syria: A Regime Isolated**

The residents of Hama have suffered some of the Syrian regime’s most vicious repression. In an attempt to snuff out an uprising, President Assad launched his security services in a brutal crackdown that leveled much of the ancient community. When the onslaught was complete, approximately ten thousand civilians and militants, nearly all Sunni, were dead.<sup>84</sup> Though this event could easily be situated in the current civil war, it occurred three decades ago in January 1982, under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad. Twenty-nine years later, his son and successor, Bashar, launched another offensive in Hama aimed at much the same goal, this time killing fewer but accomplishing less.<sup>85</sup> In 1982, the elder Assad’s Hama offensive effectively ended the Syrian uprising but the same was not true for his son’s 2011 sequel. The origins of the

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<sup>83</sup> Arquilla, John, David F. Ronfeldt, *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), 169.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “A Syrian City Amid Rubble Of Rebellion,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1982, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/29/world/a-syrian-city-amid-rubble-of-rebellion.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Nada Bakri, “Syrian Forces Extend the Siege of Hama,” *New York Times*, August 6, 2011, accessed on February 2, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/world/middleeast/07syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/world/middleeast/07syria.html?_r=0).

ongoing Syrian civil war have important connections to consolidation of the Ba'athist state under the elder Assad and the uprisings in the late 1970s and early 80s.<sup>86</sup> To understand the process by which the current Syrian civil war emerged, it is important to address several key elements: the nature of the Ba'ath party-state and its hold on power; the anti-Western character of the Assad dynasty; drought and demographics; and the momentum from the wider Arab Spring.

### The Origins and Features of Minority Rule

The formation and evolution of the Syrian Ba'ath party is central to the civil war's origins. The Ba'ath (literally: rebirth) movement originated in Syria's struggle for independence from the desire of nationalists to forge a unified Syrian and Arab identity that fused the diverse population. The state of Syrian intra-factional relations differed little in the mid-twentieth century from 1800 when the wife of a British diplomat observed:

They hate one another. The Sunnis excommunicate the Shias and both hate the Druze; all detest the Alawis; the Maronites do not love anybody but themselves and are duly abhorred by all. The Greek Orthodox abominate the Greek Catholics and the Latins; all despise the Jews.<sup>87</sup>

The current outlines of the Syrian civil war were loosely sketched out in the ways these diverse peoples related to each other after the collapse of Ottoman rule.

The 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement made it possible for Britain and France to carve up the defunct Ottoman Empire's Arab lands into their respective mandates. France took control over modern-day Syria and Lebanon. Under Ottoman rule, Syria's majority Sunni-Arab population overwhelmingly occupied positions of power in the government, military, and society. The French largely reinforced the Ottoman's system of majority rule through the dispensation of power and patronage through urban Sunni elites.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Tom Blanton, "History Repeats Itself as Tragedy," *Foreign Policy*, September 21, 2012, accessed on March 22, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/21/history-repeats-itself-as-tragedy/>.

<sup>87</sup> Isabel Burton, quoted in Martha Neff Kessler, *Syria: Fragile Mosaic of Power* (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 1987), 3-11.

Crucially, however, the French added a new wrinkle to this Ottoman-era status quo. In a “divide and rule” strategy, the French granted autonomy and semi-autonomy to several regions inhabited by other sects, specifically the Druze and the Alawites. By granting limited autonomy to some sects, the French hoped to limit the contact and cooperation possible between would-be Sunni nationalists and other key constituencies. By dispensing power and privilege to the Sunni elite and weakening ties between that elite and the mass of Syria’s people, the French made it difficult for Syrian nationalist movements to extend their influence beyond certain major cities.<sup>89</sup>

Two political ideologies developed in this fractured society. The first was the Pan-Arabism movement that sought to reinforce a common Arab identity that cut across all sectarian and economic lines. Arab nationalism was a fundamental feature of Pan-Arabism as it stressed the unity and dignity of Arab peoples and a rejection of foreign rule, either European or Ottoman. The early leaders of Pan-Arab thought were primarily Sunni and the movement held significant promise for cementing Sunni elite power. The second major ideology was socialism. For much of its history, Syria was semi-feudal with the agricultural lands in the possession of a relative few private landowners. Beneath the landowners, impoverished sharecroppers and landless laborers constituted the remainder of Syrian society.<sup>90</sup> Just as the Sunni elites were suspicious of socialism for its potential to undermine the current system, the rural poor were suspicious of pan-Arabism because it reinforced the existing status quo.

The Ba’ath party provided the unifying framework for these two ideologies. Ba’athism was largely a secular movement and it appealed to the broadest possible range of Syrians regardless of creed. By supporting Arab nationalism, it reinforced the Sunni-elites’ hold on power. By downplaying religion, it allayed the fears of smaller sects, such as the Alawites, who

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<sup>88</sup> Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread Nor Freedom* (New York: Zed Books, 2003), 65.

<sup>89</sup> Ayse Tekdal Fildis, "Roots of the Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria," *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 148.

<sup>90</sup> George, *Syria*, 66

were skeptical of any scheme that increased the Sunni's relative power. It complemented its broad ethnic appeal with a broad economic appeal in 1952 when it merged with the Arab Socialist Party (ASP).<sup>91</sup> The merger with the ASP brought the Ba'ath a mass peasant constituency—and a peasant identity—creating a foundational ideology that identified all Syrians as Arabs first.<sup>92</sup>

The Sunni elite certainly noted the potential threat to their privileged position as both socialism and nationalism awoke in the rural poor. However, as an ideological movement, Ba'athism ignored elite interest in the status quo and, by the 1950s, spoke to the rising *zeitgeist* of the Syrian people.<sup>93</sup> Tellingly, the Ba'ath party's influential patriarch was a Greek Orthodox Arab—no Sunni—who dismissed sectarian distinctions and Sunni cultural hegemony:

We will not say to the Arabs that they will reach the unified, free and socialist life, the Baathist life, in the future...but we say to them: this is the image we have of that life. This is the life where social disparities, and regional barriers and sectarian shameful stains will vanish as will all the vestiges of servitude, private interests and imitation.<sup>94</sup>

Ba'athism sought to raise up all levels of society from the individual peasant, to the Syrian state, and the broader Arab nation.

The bigger the Ba'ath tent, and the more nationalist the goals, the more opportunities there were for previously underrepresented classes to succeed. The Alawite sect in particular benefited from this enfranchisement. This was especially true in the military that saw its ranks balloon with volunteers from Alawite and other minority groupings.<sup>95</sup> The traditionally poor Alawites were attracted to the military by the lure of salaries and opportunities for advancement. While the minorities rushed to join the military, the Sunni elites eschewed military service. The

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<sup>91</sup> Fildis, "Roots of the Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria," 154.

<sup>92</sup> George, *Syria*, 66.

<sup>93</sup> Fildis, "Roots of the Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria," 149.

<sup>94</sup> Michel Aflaq, *Choice of Texts From the Baath Party Founder's Thought* (1977), <http://www.archive.org/details/ChoiceOfTextsFromTheBathPartyFoundersThought>, 94.

<sup>95</sup> Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford: The Hoover Institution, 2012), 25.

Sunni elite's unwillingness to commit their sons to military service was what Fildis called, "the historic mistake of the leading families and of the mercantile and landowning class."<sup>96</sup> The military grew in power and prestige and so did the minority sects that swelled its ranks.

Between its independence from France and 1970, Syria endured five major coups that paved the way for minority Alawite rule. Members of the military perpetrated each coup and on every occasion, those responsible purged and counter-purged their rivals. Though much of the minorities were overrepresented in the Syrian military, many of the senior officers remained Sunni throughout this period. In the coup process, however, senior Sunni officers decreased in number while Alawites inherited their positions. As Alawites became more senior, they brought more junior Alawites into positions of authority.<sup>97</sup>

In 1970, this process allowed Hafez al-Assad, to seize the presidency in the final coup euphemistically dubbed the "Corrective Movement." Hafez began his life as an Alawite peasant in a family and community that had always been fearful of Sunni domination. In fact, his grandfather was a signatory on a 1936 petition to the French government begging for Alawite autonomy out of fear that inclusion in a Sunni-dominated state would consign them to "mortal danger."<sup>98</sup> Through the Ba'ath party's Alawite expansion, Hafez rose through the party and military ranks to air force general, to defense secretary, and eventually to president. Once Assad seized the presidency, minority rule became the Syrian norm to the present day. Alawite rule became—and remains—a major source of discontent for Syrian Sunnis who felt humiliated, marginalized, and denied their perceived leadership role in Syrian society.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, 21-2.

<sup>99</sup> Fildis, "Roots of the Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria," 154; Richard Spencer, "Muslim Brotherhood Cleric Calls for Sunni Jihad in Syria," *Telegraph*, June 2, 2013, accessed on February 17, 2015,

This sectarian friction was harbinger of the Arab Spring, the Syrian uprising in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The uprising was an extended period of insurgency and civil strife wherein a Sunni Islamist movement struck at the Alawite regime. The Muslim Brotherhood movement was the primary protagonist against the government. The Brothers rode the wave of Islamic militancy that swept through the Middle East in the 1970s, culminating in the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the Afghan jihad. By the late 1970s, the Brotherhood had increased moral support from Sunni population that increasingly familiar with this new wave of Islamism. They reminded their erstwhile supporters that the Syrian Ba'ath party was totally unacceptable for two reasons: the Ba'athist doctrine was largely secular and the rulers—Alawites—were, in their view, apostates.<sup>100</sup>

After a spate of terrorist attacks in 1979, Ba'ath party officials could scarcely be seen in public without bodyguards and tight security. The attacks focused on three broad targets: Alawites, Ba'athists, and Sunni clergy allied with the state.<sup>101</sup> The Assad regime met the challenges by at first offering minor concessions. Foreshadowing future responses to anti-regime uprisings, Assad increased public sector salaries, allowed public criticism, and cracked down on corruption. None of these measures decreased the strength of the rebellion.<sup>102</sup> After a particularly gruesome June 1979 attack on Alawite army officers at an Aleppo artillery school, Assad backed away from concessions and embraced a hardline approach to the uprising.<sup>103</sup> His brother, Rif'at, encouraged the regime to wage a deliberate war against the Brothers. He argued that just as Stalin

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<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10094590/Muslim-Brotherhood-cleric-calls-for-Sunni-jihad-in-Syria.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Kessler, *Syria*, 37.

<sup>101</sup> Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggler For the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 325.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.



saw fit to sacrifice countless human lives to preserve and secure the established order, Syria had to do the same.<sup>104</sup>

The new hardline culminated in the Syrian army's offensive into the Sunni city of Hama. The Syrian uprising's human costs totaled over 15,000 lives, the vast majority Sunni civilians and Muslim Brotherhood members.<sup>105</sup> The Assad regime's brutal response to the Islamist uprising saved the regime, but as Seale observed, "it also changed its character" from a populist, nationalist government to a repressive totalitarian security state that would never again tolerate dissent.<sup>106</sup>

The Brotherhood's support base were the urban centers where they recruited the Sunni youth excluded from the Assad regime's constituency. The 1973 October War brought a windfall of public support, as well as financial stability, to the Syrian government because of increased oil revenues due to the 1973 oil embargo. The windfall profits allowed the Assad regime to dramatically expand the public sector and to fund massive development projects to benefit and shore up the Ba'athist base: the rural, agricultural sector.<sup>107</sup> These twin developments consolidated the regime's authority through an increased cadre of public sector employees as well as prosperous peasants, but excluded the cities—particularly the urban poor—from the developmental benefits. Excluding the urban Sunni may have motivated much of the Syrian uprising, but the regime's support was broad enough to survive. As Seale concluded, "Ba'athist Syria, a state ruled by an armed party and resting on a broad coalition of the countryside and

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> "Major Episodes of Political Violence: 1946 – 2013," Center for Systemic Peace, last modified March 27, 2014, accessed on March 22, 2015, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/warlist.htm#>.

<sup>106</sup> Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 327.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 318.

public sector, proved robust enough to defeat the challenge.”<sup>108</sup> Alan George summarized the Assad regime’s hold on power as the product of the combined strength of several key constituencies: the Alawi community, “the poorer peasantry, workers in state-owned enterprises and the vast state bureaucracy. These key characteristics tied the regime into a Gordian knot.”<sup>109</sup>

The delicate Syrian power balance depended on the personal power of Hafez al-Assad and his broad support base. As succession approached in the 1990s, the various factions and competitors in Syria’s politics agreed that dynastic succession was the most likely to produce stability and maintain the status quo. Hafez’s first choice as a successor was his eldest son, Basil, who had enormous personal power and ties to the Damascus political class. However, Basil’s death in a 1994 automobile accident upset the succession plans.<sup>110</sup> Attention then quickly turned to Hafez’s younger, politically detached, and less well-known son—Bashar—as the heir apparent. When the elder Assad passed away in 2000, his thirty-four year old son assumed leadership of the Syrian party-state.

Bashar was welcomed as a reformer at home and greeted with similar hope in foreign capitals.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, during his first few months in power, the Western-educated ophthalmologist embarked on a limited liberalization program that appeared to many as a genuine opportunity for political change. The so-called “Damascus Spring” refers to the first seven or eight months of Bashar’s presidency in which he enacted liberal reforms, including a general amnesty for political prisoners, the licensing of private newspapers, reforms to the state-controlled media apparatus,

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>109</sup> George, *Syria*, 158.

<sup>110</sup> William E. Schmidt, “Assad’s Son Killed in an Auto Crash,” *New York Times*, January 22, 1994, accessed on February 13, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/01/22/world/assad-s-son-killed-in-an-auto-crash.html>.

<sup>111</sup> Jane Perez, “Powell Goes on the Road and Scores Some Points,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2000, accessed on February 11, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/02/world/powell-goes-on-the-road-and-scores-some-points.html>.

the provision of political forms and salons tolerant of open criticism and dissent, and a diminution of his father's personality cult.<sup>112</sup>

Simultaneously, however, Bashar attempted to temper expectations for wholesale democratization. In a message designed to manage foreign expectations, Bashar asserted that Syria could not simply march straight into the democratic "end of history" and reassured the political class that the old power structures would remain intact. In his June 2000 inauguration speech, Bashar alluded to the difficulty of attempting to follow a pre-determined or pseudo-scientific "path" to democracy. He indicated that such positivist dreams downplayed the long, complex, and context-dependent political developments that produced Western liberal democracies.<sup>113</sup>

A key feature of the Damascus Spring was the dramatic growth of civil society groups. The largest such organization, the Friends of Civil Society in Syria, formed in August 2000 with the mission to, "revive the institutions of civil society and achieve a balance between their role and that of these state in the context of a real partnership between them in the higher national interest."<sup>114</sup> The Friends was formed by an influential Syrian politician that was expressly focused on lifting the 1963 "martial law" that had provided the Assad regime license to silence all forms of political dissent.<sup>115</sup> It is striking to note that even though many of Syria's most senior political military officials were opposed to the stated goals of the Friends and other civil society groups, they officially sanctioned their existence. According to a Lebanese newspaper, the Assad regime

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<sup>112</sup> David W. Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and Modern Syria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 83.

<sup>113</sup> Bashar al-Assad, "Inaugural Address," (Damascus, July 17, 2000) last modified June 18, 2009, accessed on February 11, 2015, <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/countries/syria/bashar00a.htm>.

<sup>114</sup> Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus*, 87.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

set two “red lines” for the groups: no relations with Westerners and no secrets from the government.<sup>116</sup>

Civil society groups grew in size and momentum throughout 2000. They were largely grassroots movements; many operated out of activists’ living rooms. The movements multiplied as satellite media organizations—Al Jazeera in particular—broadcast their messages into millions of Syrian homes.<sup>117</sup> The growth resulted in the inevitable inclusion of many activists that were considerably less docile than the original Friends. By January 2001, the civil society movement included more overt anti-regime groups that circulated anti-regime manifestos that assailed the legitimacy of the Ba’ath party, rejected the Chinese “economics-first” reform model, and called for a multi-party democratic political system.<sup>118</sup>

The Damascus Spring turned to winter by February 2001 when Bashar warned that any actors that threatened “stability”—irrespective of their intentions—would be dealt “with in a similar fashion.”<sup>119</sup> Assad imposed tighter restrictions on civil society groups and newspapers and jailed (in some cases “re-jailed”) political activists. By February 2001, Bashar was convinced of the latent threats to his regime and rejected demands to withdraw the emergency law. In addressing his critics, he acknowledged that the law was unfortunate, but reminded them that if the United States required the “PATRIOT Act” after the September 11 attacks, then surely Syria required its own security measures given the multifarious threats it faced, including Israel, Iraq, Lebanon, and others.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>120</sup> James Bennet, “The Enigma of Damascus,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 10, 2005, accessed on February 13, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/10/magazine/10SYRIA.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/10/magazine/10SYRIA.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

While Assad relegated political reforms to the requirement for stability, he pursued economic reforms as an imperative for regime survival. Under his father, economic development relied on the dominant oil sector.<sup>121</sup> The agricultural development and rural investment projects that expanded the Ba'ath party's peasant base were all funded in large part by the oil economy. However, in the early 2000s, there were genuine concerns about the future of Syria's petroleum economy and its diminishing reserves.<sup>122</sup> The Assad regime had supplemented its own dwindling oil supplies by bringing sanctioned Iraqi oil to market. However, this source of semi-illicit revenue evaporated after the US-led invasion into Iraq that toppled Saddam in 2003.

In his first decade of power, Bashar al-Assad faced significant challenges. Ba'ath power rested on a delicate coalition of rural peasants, government employees, and Alawite base. With state revenues dwindling, Bashar needed to broaden his party-state's legitimacy and thereby ensure regime survival. Lingering resentment over minority rule continued and the only remedy in the early to mid-2000s was to make the ruling class less minority and more coalitional. Since significant political reforms were out of the question, economic reforms were the most obvious path. These required the support of the largely Sunni business community that had always carried a simmering resentment against the Alawite ruling clique.<sup>123</sup> All the while, the legacy of the Hama massacre stalked the Syrian state while the security services remained wary of Sunni agitation.

#### Anti-Westernism, Self-Sufficiency, and Agricultural Development

The Ba'ath party was anti-colonial and anti-Western from the start, and those tendencies intensified in the late-twentieth century. As a nominally socialist state during the Cold War,

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<sup>121</sup> Seale, *Asad*, 318.

<sup>122</sup> Colin J. Campbell, "Forecasting Global Oil Supply 2000-2050," *Hubbert Center Newsletter* 3 (2002): 7.

<sup>123</sup> George, *Syria*, 161; Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus*, 212.

Ba'athist political messages were troubling to Washington.<sup>124</sup> Syria's post-independence political landscape was often hostile to the United States' regional plans. In particular, the United States hoped for an oil pipeline from Saudi Arabia through Syria to the Mediterranean.<sup>125</sup> However, Syria's Cold War orientation toward the Soviet Union scuttled such hopes. In fact, as Syria leaned further into the Soviet bloc in the 1950s, the United States supported covert action to remove the Ba'athists and replace them with a pro-western, Sunni dominated party.<sup>126</sup> Syria's frequent military conflicts with Israel during the 1960s and 70s naturally further strained relations with the West.

After the 11 September attacks, Syria's relationship with the United States deteriorated. As early as May 2002, less than two years after Bashar had assumed his father's role, neo-conservatives in the United States had given him new threats to consider. John Bolton—then Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs—named Syria, alongside Cuba and Libya, as a “rogue state” that presented a clear danger to the United States. These states were selected, in part, for being expressly anti-American and all were on the state sponsor of terrorism list.<sup>127</sup> Alongside the more strident line from Washington came the ascension of the Likud party in Israel. Likud maintained favorable ties with the Bush administration as highlighted by the tacit approval given by the United States to Israel for 2003 air strikes on

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<sup>124</sup> William J. Jorden, “Moscow Pledges Backing to Syria,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1956, accessed on February 1, 2015, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1956/11/04/90754842.html?pageNumber=10>.

<sup>125</sup> Douglas Little, “Cold War and Covert Action: The U.S. and Syria, 1945-1958,” *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 1 (Winter, 1990): 12.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 – 3; Phillip Anderson, “‘Summer Madness’: The Crisis in Syria, August-October 1957,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 22, no. 1/2 (1995): 27.

<sup>127</sup> US Department of State, State Sponsor of Terrorism List, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/list/c14151.htm>; John O’Neil, “U.S. Restores Diplomatic Ties to Libya,” May 15, 2006, accessed on February 13, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/15/world/middleeast/15cnd-libya.html>.

suspected Islamic Jihad training camps in Syrian territory.<sup>128</sup> In late 2002, the US Navy boarded and searched Syrian merchant vessels in the Mediterranean bound for Turkey. They apparently found nothing, but served as further evidence for Assad that the United States was a growing threat to this regime.<sup>129</sup>

Many analysts interpreted Bashar's actions in the aftermath of 11 September as a calculated move to deter Western attempts at coup-making or regime change. These actions included the forbearance of a growing militant network within Syria itself to assail US forces occupying Iraq.<sup>130</sup> The Islamist presence in Syria may have served two purposes: it struck a blow at the United States directly and it gave pause to any US notions of Syrian regime change. It is not clear to what degree Assad personally sanctioned support to Iraq's insurgency, but it is misleading to suggest that he cultivated the Islamist phenomena. The militant Sunni Islamist trend tied directly to his father's struggles with the Muslim Brotherhood. It rode a wider wave of Islamism in the Middle East summed up by Lesch as the newest and most attractive ideological bent for the region: "In the wake of the failure of the socialist and capitalist paradigms...have arisen alternative ideologies to fill the void, particularly that of Islamic extremism."<sup>131</sup>

A key feature of this rivalry with the West had been the obsession in successive Assad regimes with "self-sufficiency." Specifically, self-sufficiency referred to agricultural production and a desire to avoid international food dependencies that may make the regime vulnerable to sanctions by the United States. Since the 1973 October War, Hafez al-Assad and the Ba'ath

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<sup>128</sup> Douglas Jehl, "THE MIDEAST TURMOIL: DIPLOMACY; U.S. Avoids Criticism of Raid; Urges Israel to Use Caution," *New York Times*, October 6, 2003, accessed on February 13, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/06/world/mideast-turmoil-diplomacy-us-avoids-criticism-raid-urges-israel-use-caution.html>.

<sup>129</sup> George, *Syria*, 168.

<sup>130</sup> DoD News Briefing with Gen. Petraeus from the Pentagon, April 26, 2007, accessed on February 13, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=3951>.

<sup>131</sup> Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus*, 211.

leadership feared that the United States might deploy a “food weapon” against Syria in response to Saudi Arabia’s use of the “oil weapon.”<sup>132</sup>

A food self-sufficiency policy also bolstered the regime’s domestic stability. The elder Assad’s regime relied largely on a rural, agricultural base for popular legitimacy. Through significant and sometimes lavish spending on agricultural and irrigation projects, the Assad regime rewarded and broadened its rural base.<sup>133</sup> Seale sums up the transformation succinctly:

By the late 1980s all but 2 percent of the rural population watched television and listened to the radio while refrigerators and washing machines were coming in fast. Before 1963 there was virtually no electricity in the rural areas and only some 2 to 3 percent of the population owned a refrigerator...in a mere twenty-five years Syria experienced a revolution on the land which it took France a century to accomplish.<sup>134</sup>

In addition to benefiting the Ba’ath’s core constituency, these projects emphasized ideological continuity with the party’s origins and the elder Assad who proudly proclaimed himself, “first and last a peasant...and the son of a peasant. To lie amid the spikes of grain on the threshing floor is, in my eyes, worth all the palaces in this world.”<sup>135</sup>

As Syria’s oil revenues declined, particularly after the illicit trade of Iraqi oil ended in 2003, the agricultural sector received even more investment from Bashar al-Assad’s regime. However, Bashar’s agricultural policies differed significantly from his father’s in that they focused more on efficiency and profit rather than expanding the rural party base. Agricultural produce was well below the levels necessary for the regime’s preferred self-sufficiency as well as the levels needed to fund the vast Syrian state.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Jessica Barnes, “Managing the Waters of Ba’th Country: The Politics of Water Scarcity in Syria,” *Geopolitics* 14, no. 3 (2009): 523.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 521.

<sup>134</sup> Seale, *Asad*, 447.

<sup>135</sup> Cited in Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999), 6.

<sup>136</sup> Barnes, “Managing the Waters of Ba’th Country,” 523 – 4.



The Syrian government needed to extract more from the land, but the state of Syrian soil and water was near disastrous. From the 1980s forward, agricultural developments caused severe problems as well, several of which foreshadowed Syria's current woes. Rural development rarely considered the likely ecological impact. Irrigation projects—the most common method of agricultural improvement—brought tremendous amounts of water to previously sparsely hydrated areas and dramatically increased the amount of arable land.<sup>137</sup> These projects rarely addressed the soil's natural drainage capacity. The result was large-scale salinization of significant tracts of Syrian land.<sup>138</sup>

By the mid to late 2000s, high salinity and the degradation of the land forced many small-scale farmers off their plots. Only larger farms were able to continue to harvest some produce from the land by improving drainage and installing deeper, and more expensive, wells and pumps. This coincided with Bashar al-Assad's desires to build his support base into the business community. The Syrian government began issuing permits to subsidize farmers—often wealthy individuals with political connections to the regime—to drill wells that could tap underground aquifers and thereby unlock previously inaccessible water.<sup>139</sup>

The introduction of larger commercial farming enterprises brought with it two grave effects for millions of Syrian's peasant farmers. First, when the government allowed the larger farmers to tap the aquifers, they depleted an unrenewable water source. Secondly, they drove the smaller farmers off the land who—because of the persistent drought and drained aquifers—could not access water. Syria's poor peasant farmers could neither afford nor manage to drill down to

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 524.

<sup>138</sup> Ciro Fiorillo and Jacques Vercueil, *Syrian Agriculture at the Crossroads* (Rome: Food & Agriculture Organization, 2003): 129 – 30.

<sup>139</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, "Without Water, Revolution," *New York Times*, May 19, 2013, accessed on June 5, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/19/opinion/sunday/friedman-without-water-revolution.html?pagewanted=all>.

the “new” water sources accessed by the larger farming outfits.<sup>140</sup> These consequences caused the mass migration of hundreds of thousands of Syrians from the lands they could no longer farm to the cities where they searched for work in vain.<sup>141</sup> More importantly, this alienated the Ba’athist’s traditional core constituency—the rural peasant—from the state. In 1982, the peasant—state coalition was essential for the regime’s survival. Without that tight bond, the regime was inherently fragile leading into the Arab Spring.

#### The Syrian Jafaf [Drought] and the Youth Bulge Crisis

Syria experienced its worst drought in modern times from 2006 to 2009.<sup>142</sup> The drought, or “Jafaf,” dramatically affected 60 percent of Syria’s land. Coupled with the Assad’s “deregulation” of the agricultural sector that allowed deep wells to drain the groundwater, the lack of rains exacerbated aquifer depletion.<sup>143</sup> The full impact of this drought is not fully clear and more distance and perspective from the current conflict is necessary to appreciate its total effect.

The new urban immigrants were the once vaunted rural base of the Syrian state. Though many were Sunnis, they were also members of the powerful Peasant’s Union. Farmers were once proud and masters of their plots of land. However, upon moving to the burgeoning slums outside of cities like Aleppo and Daraa, they were humiliated.<sup>144</sup> Sunni peasants had to largely scrounge and beg to survive. The government was unable to hire them into the already bloated bureaucracy

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Peter H. Gleick, “Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria,” *Weather, Climate, and Society* 6, no. 3 (July, 2014): 333 – 4.

<sup>142</sup> Colin P. Kelley et al., “Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 11 (2015): 3241 – 2.

<sup>143</sup> Gleick, “Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria,” 333 – 4.

<sup>144</sup> Friedman, “Without Water, Revolution.”

at the speed or volume required. Thomas Friedman observed that, “the drought was particularly hard on young men who wanted to study or marry but could no longer afford either.”<sup>145</sup>

The drought exacerbated the demographic and concomitant unemployment crisis that had been stalking Syria for decades. As has been the case in Egypt and the broader Middle East/North Africa region, Syria faced a youth bulge whose peak was reaching its twenties in the mid to late 2000s. Syria’s population growth was particularly pronounced in urban areas. For instance, in 1945, Damascus had approximately 300,000 residents. When Assad took power in 1970, that population had more than doubled to 700,000. By the late 1980s the numbers had ballooned to over four million in Damascus alone. This increase owed to many factors: refugees from the Golan Heights and Palestine, the growth of the state apparatus, a constant stream of rural poor migrants, medical advances, and most importantly, an uncommonly high birth rate.<sup>146</sup>

After the farmers had abandoned their lands during the drought, many dreamed of following a common path to employment by getting stable jobs either in the government or the oil sector. However, these coveted paths to advancement were controlled by the largely Alawite ruling elite and there were not enough to go around. One young disposed Sunni lamented his plight, “most of those jobs went to Alawites from Tartous and Latakia...It made people even more angry. The best jobs on our lands in our province were not for us, but for people who come from outside.”<sup>147</sup>

### Over the Brink

As the crowds swelled in Tahrir square, Bashar al-Assad projected a tragic confidence in his regime’s stability. In *Wall Street Journal* interview while the Egyptian revolution was underway, Assad trumpeted his regime’s strength and credited its “ideology” for its resiliency

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Seale, *Assad*, 442 – 3.

<sup>147</sup> Syrian citizen Zakaria Zakaria quoted in Friedman, "Without Water, Revolution."

even in the face of sanctions from the West and declining living conditions.<sup>148</sup> In truth, however, the Syrian state's hold on security had been seriously eroded by the modest liberalization during the Damascus Spring, the rising wave of Islamism in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq, and the agricultural crisis that dislocated millions of Syrians from their rural homes.

Though Syria had significantly less Internet infrastructure compared to Egypt at the time of the Spring, it did have similar penetration of satellite television.<sup>149</sup> Further, the degree of urbanization allowed for information on the Arab Spring to speed through the slums of Damascus, Aleppo, and other key cities. The impact of satellite and Internet communications weighed heavily on Assad while responding to the Arab Spring. In the spring of 2011, he delivered an embattled address to the nation as the uprising gained momentum and highlighted the disruptive role of these media: "In any case, I am sure there will be someone on the satellite T.V. stations who will say that this is not enough. What is enough for them will destroy our country and we simply cannot afford that."<sup>150</sup>

In May 2011, amid increased anti-regime activity, the Syrian security services allegedly murdered Hamza al-Khatib, a thirteen-year-old Sunni boy in Deraa, for allegedly spray painting anti-regime graffiti on a wall in his slum. Pictures of the boy's mutilated corpse became an Internet phenomena galvanized supporters of the then-burgeoning Syrian uprising. Weekly protests turned from "days of rage" to "Hamza days."<sup>151</sup> By the summer of 2011, the Syrian civil

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<sup>148</sup> "Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad," *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, accessed on February 17, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894>.

<sup>149</sup> Hussain and Howard, "What Best Explains Successful Protest Cascades?" *International Studies*, 62; Khondker, "Role of the New Media in the Arab Spring," 678.

<sup>150</sup> Bashar al-Assad, "Speech by President Bashar al-Assad to the Syrian parliament on 30 March 2011 in response to a wave of protests around the country," March 30, 2011, accessed on February 17, 2015 [http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/syria/bashar\\_assad\\_speech\\_110330.htm](http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/syria/bashar_assad_speech_110330.htm).

<sup>151</sup> Sonia Verma, "How a 13 Year Old Became a Symbol of Syrian Revolution," June 1, 2011, accessed on February 12, 2015, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/how-a-13-year-old-became-a-symbol-of-syrian-revolution/article4260803/>.

war had begun with images and slogans about Hamza and the illegitimacy of the Assad regime rousing popular support.

The Syrian civil war is the most destructive and unsettling byproduct of the Arab Spring. Within its borders alone, the carnage had claimed 200,000 lives and displaced upwards of ten million Syrians by January 2015.<sup>152</sup> As with Egypt, US officials and its military must appreciate the civil war's complex origins in order to navigate the crisis. This requires an understanding of the internal Syrian sociopolitical dynamics leading up to this crisis. Through a review of the Syrian crisis, five essential dynamics appear central to its origins: the nature of the minority rule in the Ba'ath party state and authoritarian hold on power; the long-standing antagonism between Damascus and Washington; long-term demographic growth pressures coupled with rapid on-set climate-driven stressors; and the momentum from the wider Arab Spring.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

The Arab Spring revolutions and the hydra-headed crises that sprung from them threaten regional and international stability. In addressing these crises, the United States must seriously consider the drivers of the Arab Spring as advocated in the 2015 National Security Strategy, which stated: "Stability and peace in the Middle East and North Africa also requires reducing the underlying causes of conflict."<sup>153</sup> The Arab Spring did not appear *de novo*. The United States military and foreign policy communities, especially, must develop a broad and substantive appreciation for how Egypt, Syria, and the other Arab Spring-affected nations became fragile to

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<sup>152</sup> Kyung wah-Kang, "Security Council Briefing on Syria," (Prepared Remarks by the United Nations Assistant Secretary General and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator on behalf of Valerie Amos, New York, January 28, 2015) accessed January 29, 2015, <https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/USG%20SecCo%20statement%20on%20Syria%2028%20January%202015%20as%20delivered.pdf>; Rick Gladstone and Mohammed Ghannam, "Syria Deaths Hit New High in 2014, Observer Group Says," *New York Times*, January 1, 2015, accessed on January 29, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/02/world/middleeast/syrian-civil-war-2014-deadliest-so-far.html>; <http://www.usaid.gov/crisis/syria>.

<sup>153</sup> Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy*, (February 1, 2015), [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy\\_2.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf).

the point at which rebellion and revolution was possible. Such turmoil, particularly in this region and on this scale, is a critical national security issue for the United States.

By evaluating the paths to crisis in Egypt and Syria, this monograph reveals some crucial insights into the Arab Spring as a phenomenon. Some factors are unique and distinguish the cases from one another. In Egypt, the failure to deal with official corruption and unsuccessful liberalization schemes left much of Egyptian society without “social justice.” The young Egyptian middle class saw little hope for themselves or their nation and were mobilized to oust the regime. In Syria, Alawite minority rule was an essential source of the state’s political weakness that resulted in little resiliency for the regime once it lost the support of its rural base. With few durable connections to the majority of Syria’s Sunni population, Assad’s regime had few allies or clients to rely on. Addressing these dynamics is essential to nurturing a durable stability in the region.

Other factors demonstrate several commonalities between Egypt and Syria that primed the entire region for cascading revolution. These included regional phenomena such as the proliferation of information and communication technologies, burdensome birthrates and demographic pressures, the continued—and growing—salience of Salafi extremism within the Sunni communities, and climate-driven stressors. The similarities also include domestic phenomena such as repressive and abusive security regimes that alienated large segments of society from their government and limited opportunity at political reform and adaptation.

In these case studies, climatic pressure and its interrelated effects on food security deserve serious attention. Extreme heat and droughts in China, Russia, and Ukraine cut deep into the global grain supply in 2010. Egypt’s outsized dependence on foreign grain imports for its dietary consumption staple made it particularly vulnerable to the vicissitudes in prices.<sup>154</sup> The

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<sup>154</sup> Tom Parfitt, “Vladimir Putin Bans Grain Exports as Drought and Wildfires Ravage Crops,” *The Guardian*, August 5, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/aug/05/vladimir-putin-ban-grain-exports>; Neil MacFarquhar, “Food Prices Worldwide Hit Record Levels, Fueled by Uncertainty, U.N. says,”

increase in food prices imposed an immense burden on Egyptian families—and families across the region—to put food on the table while maintaining their expected living standards. In Syria, the 2006 to 2009 drought dislocated hundreds of thousands of Syrians to urban slums where they drew closer physically, but further psychologically from the regime.

In both Egypt and Syria, climatic pressure functioned, as described by the US Department Defense, as a “threat multiplier.”<sup>155</sup> Because a vocal minority remains skeptical that manmade (anthropogenic) climate change is occurring, it is important to recognize that even if climate extremes were simply the result of natural, decadal weather patterns and not anthropogenic climate change, the effects on stressed societies are the same.<sup>156</sup> Droughts and floods kill crops whether caused by man or God. For the US military—and the Army in particular—climate change’s greatest significance is its impact on human conflict. Weather extremes are the key mechanisms through which the climate drives sociopolitical instability. They are likely to cause increased resource conflicts, urbanization and migration, and increased costs of living globally just as they did in advance of the Arab Spring. To understand its operational environment, the US military must understand how changes in the climate (the physical environment) will change and stress human societies (the operational environment).

Nevertheless, climate-driven pressures are not the isolated *cause* of these events. In his study of societal collapse, Jared Diamond found that while environmental degradation was a common and prominent feature, he cautioned against elevating mono-causal ecological

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*New York Times*, February 3, 2011,  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/04/world/04food.html?ref=asia>.

<sup>155</sup> US Department of Defense, *2014 Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap*, Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Installations and Environment (Alexandria: June 2014): Foreword.

<sup>156</sup> Christopher B. Field, et al. *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability, Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. United Nations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 111.

interpretations of communal failure above all others: “[Our] single most important problem is our misguided focus on identifying the single most important problem!”<sup>157</sup> Diamond finds that more than simply pressures from changing physical environments, it was a failure to adapt to those changes that consigned a society to ruin. He concluded that “two types of choices...have been crucial in tipping their outcomes toward success or failure: long-term planning, and willingness to reconsider core values.”<sup>158</sup> Unfortunately, for the Mubarak and Assad regimes, applying one of these “choices” without the other results in a fragile and sclerotic state that is unlikely to cope with climatic or other disruptions.

In both Egypt and Syria, the regimes’ inflated belief in their ability to plan, and a failure to adapt when those plans to the emerging environment, was an essential element of their failures. In Egypt, massive central planning that began with Nasser and continued through to Mubarak failed to deliver the promised shared prosperity and yielded a stagnant and divided society with little connecting the wealthy to the rest. In Syria, development projects left the regime with unsustainable infrastructure and a severely degraded environment. Widespread urban migration and political disenfranchisement resulted soon thereafter. Both states, it seems, were guilty of what James Scott dubbed the “Failure of Schematics,” which he described as central planning schemes such as these that “inevitably leave out elements that are essential to their actual functioning.”<sup>159</sup> These crucial elements are usually human and political. In Egypt, the essential element left out was the creation and stabilization of the middle class. In Syria, it was the failure to enfranchise and include the Sunni majority more meaningfully in the state.

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<sup>157</sup> Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 498.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 522.

<sup>159</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 350 – 1.



Egypt and Syria are neither isolated nor completely unique cases. Similar examples of fragile regimes with questionable capacity to adapt exist all over the globe. Climate change, urbanization, underperforming economies, and inadequate governance threaten several Latin American countries—Venezuela especially.<sup>160</sup> Sub-Saharan Africa is the archetype for the “climate-conflict” nexus where governments face the adaptation challenge with even lesser capacity for long-term planning.<sup>161</sup> China faces significant ecological, demographic, political, and security challenges and its ability to withstand these pressures is far from certain.<sup>162</sup> This recounting is by no means complete. Demographic and climatic pressures will amplify political weaknesses in a great many countries and their ability to adapt to survive is essential.

The fact that the US military is likely to deepen its response to the Arab Spring and similar crises indicates that studying the origins of these crises is indispensable. Carl Von Clausewitz warned that:

[T]he first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”<sup>163</sup>

If the United States lack the historical and political fluency for future conflicts, it jeopardizes the success of the entire mission. Without such fluency in the causes and features of contemporary conflicts, the US military is unlikely to successfully “establish the kind of war” it is in because it

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<sup>160</sup> Juan Cristóbal Nagel, “Venezuela’s Maduro Must Adapt to Survive. He Won’t,” *Foreign Policy*, December 12, 2014, accessed on March 17, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/12/venezuelas-maduro-must-adapt-to-survive-he-wont/>.

<sup>161</sup> Joshua W. Busby, et al., “Identifying Hot Spots of Security Vulnerability Associated with Climate Change in Africa,” *Climatic Change* 124, no. 4 (2014): 717.

<sup>162</sup> David Shambaugh, “The Coming Chinese Crackup,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2015, accessed on March 6, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-coming-chinese-crack-up-1425659198>.

<sup>163</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed and trans by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 88.

will not understand the complex sociopolitical and ecological phenomena that gave rise to the conflict in the first place.

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